

TACKLING

Silositis – the division disease

WHEN WE SAY 'CUSTOMER CARE',
WHAT DO WE MEAN?

When examining failure of local government to deliver services, a lack of funds and lack of capacity, the failure to spend allocated budgets and lagging repairs and maintenance are found to be the usual culprits for poor municipal performance and accumulating backlogs. However, a recent programme on customer relations management at Buffalo City revealed that problems are mostly due to a lack of internal communication, co-ordination and co-operation, that is, a lack of internal customer care.

Everyday practice

Abel Jack works in the electricity department. He gets a call from the customer care centre to go and deal with an electricity problem. The operator at the call centre tells him that she had to deal with a very irate person, complaining about an electricity outage at her house and threatening to sue the municipality for damages suffered as a result. He

key points

- A complex organisation needs to have functionally separate departments but all too often these divisions become silos that do not communicate with one another.
- This ultimately impacts negatively on the interface with the ratepayer or external customer.
- Improved customer management and service provision are therefore critical to building an environment conducive to economic and social development.

dispatches staff to attend to the problem, only to find out, once on site, that the electricity supply to the house was cut off by the finance department as a result of arrear payments. His staff now find themselves bearing the brunt of the home owner's rage and leave the scene quite upset about the lack of communication between departments in the municipality. Time and resources are wasted and internal relationships suffer.

What went wrong in this story? The finance department should have informed the central municipal call centre and the electricity department that the specific household's electricity had been cut off due to payments being in arrears so that the problem could have been channelled appropriately.

This is a real scenario from Buffalo City in 2006 (names were changed), but is also a familiar story in many municipalities in South Africa.

Officials argue, firstly, they are not getting adequate 'customer' service from their colleagues in other departments and secondly, that supporting systems and processes to aid communication and co-operation are not in place to facilitate internal co-ordination. One can call this institutional disease 'silositis'. A complex organisation needs to have functionally separate departments but all too often these divisions become silos that do not communicate with one another. This ultimately impacts negatively on the interface with the ratepayer or external customer.

Countless such anecdotes surfaced at Buffalo City municipality and are common throughout South Africa. However, Buffalo City is one of the first municipalities in South Africa to develop a comprehensive customer care

strategy, following a customer relations survey and the consequent development of a customer care charter. The municipality provides an important case study for the exploration of issues around customer relations management in local government.

Legal and policy framework

Existing legislation and policy focuses mainly on the relationship between the municipality and the citizen or ratepayer. The promotion of customer relations management in local government is entrenched in the White Paper on Local Government (1998) where it is specifically stated that “municipalities need to be responsive to the needs of both citizens and business as consumers and end-users of municipal services. Improved customer management and service provision are critical to building an environment conducive to economic and social development”.

The Municipal Systems Act also refers to the promotion of community participation and the need for municipalities to implement mechanisms and communication channels in order to deal with queries and complaints, as well as to allow communities to provide their inputs into the operations and performance of the municipality.

Section 6 of the Act, for example, requires municipalities to:

- be responsive to the needs of the local community;
- establish clear relationships, and facilitate co-operation and communication between it and the local community;
- give members of the local community full and accurate information about the level and standard of municipal services they are entitled to receive; and
- inform the local community how the municipality is managed, of the costs involved and the persons in charge.

By its nature, however, legislation makes very limited reference to how departments are meant to interact internally. Section 51 of the Systems Act states that the administration must be organised in such a manner to:

- facilitate a culture of public service and accountability among staff;
- establish clear relationships, and facilitate co-operation, co-ordination and communication between...its political structures, political office bearers and administration and the local community; and

- maximise efficiency of communication and decision-making within the administration.

One angle on the war on silositis is that it doesn't take money to fix, but simply will and a subtle change in mindset. The customer care workshops in Buffalo City involved approximately 280 city officials and the findings of the workshops revealed the need for the formalisation of an internal customer relationship. Each department participated in developing an internal customer charter, which will be put into effect in the coming months. The charter dictates that officials and councillors should start regarding each other as internal customers of the services that their specific department or unit provides: “In one capacity I am a provider of a service or an input to someone else in the system, in another I am the recipient or customer at the receiving end of the product or services being passed down the service delivery line”. In the final analysis it is the citizen who receives the sum total of the internal efforts undertaken on a daily basis in the municipality.

Comment

While capacity, skills and resource constraints remain problems in the municipal environment, the lack of internal streamlining seems to provide a major stumbling block in providing adequate service delivery. As a result, blockages need to be removed, processes need to be streamlined and systems need to be put in place to avoid bottlenecks and misinformation. In addition, and most importantly, officials should regard their colleagues as customers as well. Once this is done, many municipalities will find themselves in a better position to deal with the external customer.

The next step in improving customer care, be it internal or external, is the formalisation of a charter, strategy and policy to make internalise customer relations management part of the every day functioning of a municipality.

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This is the first of a series of articles on customer relations management in local government. Subsequent articles will be dealing with the development of a customer care strategy and charter and a model for customer care in local government.